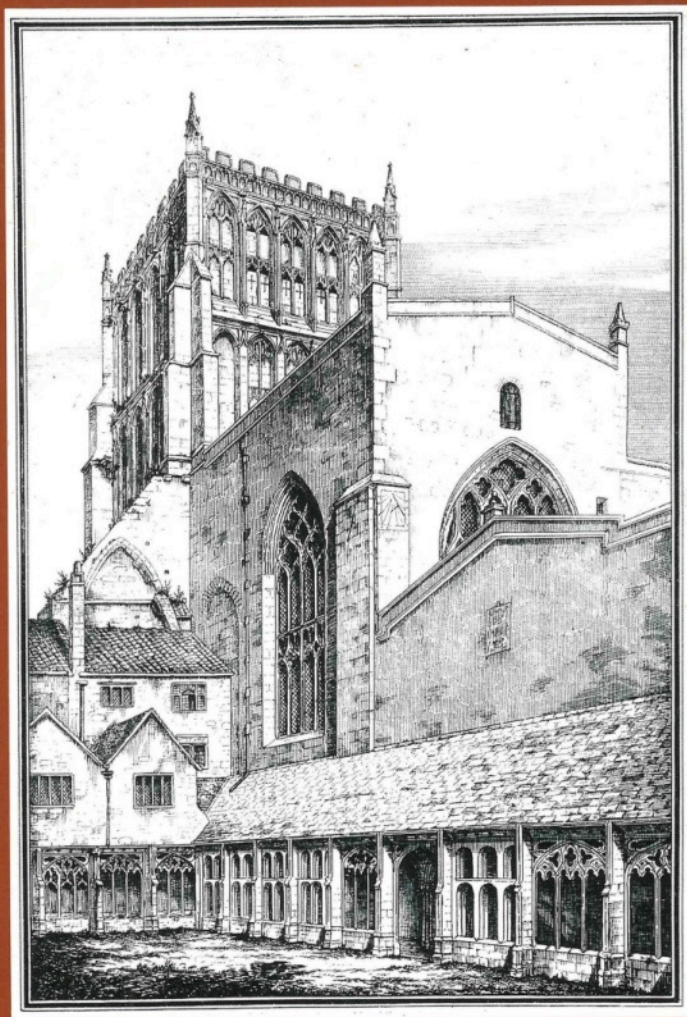


ST AUGUSTINE'S ABBEY, BRISTOL



JOSEPH BETTEY

THE BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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St Augustine's Abbey is the eighty-eighth pamphlet in the Local History series published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association.

Dr Joseph Bettey was Reader in Local History at the University of Bristol. He is Chairman of the Fabric Advisory Committee of Bristol Cathedral, and has written three earlier pamphlets for this series on *Bristol Churches and the Reformation* (1979), *The Suppression of the Religious Houses in Bristol* (1990) and *Bristol Cathedral: The Rebuilding of the Nave* (1993). Together these pamphlets show the way in which St Augustine's abbey was founded and developed during the Middle Ages, how the abbey was suppressed in 1539 and made into the cathedral for the newly-created diocese of Bristol in 1542, and provide an account of the remarkable campaign during the nineteenth century which resulted in the rebuilding of the nave. Much of the evidence for these pamphlets is contained in the archives of the Dean and Chapter which are now in the Bristol Record Office. The author is grateful to the Dean and Chapter for permission to use these records and to the archivists for their assistance.

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Cover Illustration: Eighteenth-century view of the abbey buildings from the south west, showing the central tower, cloister and houses built on the site of the nave.

ST AUGUSTINE'S ABBEY, BRISTOL

A mystery underlies the well-established facts concerning the foundation of St Augustine's abbey which was later to become Bristol cathedral. The abbey was founded for Augustinian canons in 1140 by Robert Fitzharding, a wealthy and well-connected royal official, who owned the manor of Bedminster with Redcliffe and other estates around Bristol. It was on one of these estates known as Billeswicke that he founded the abbey, choosing as the site a plateau overlooking the river Avon and just outside the town of Bristol with its royal castle and busy port. Robert Fitzharding, who later became lord of Berkeley, provided extensive lands and properties in Bristol and the surrounding region for the support of his abbey, and during the next few decades the house received many further endowments including lands in Wales and Ireland from the Berkeley family and notably from King Henry II who came to the throne in 1154. Thus the abbey rapidly became a wealthy and influential institution, and throughout the rest of the Middle Ages it was by far the most important ecclesiastical centre in Bristol which was far from the diocesan centres of Worcester and Wells.

Behind these well-authenticated facts, however, there is the question of why the particular site was chosen by Fitzharding, and of what may previously have existed there. The surviving evidence is inconclusive, but suggests that there may already have been a long-established religious shrine or chapel on the site, although the clues are tantalisingly scarce and imprecise.¹ A local tradition which was recorded by the antiquarian, John Leland, during the 1540s, asserted that the site had been visited by St Augustine of Canterbury, 'the apostle of the English', during the course of a journey in 603 when he met the leaders of the Welsh or British Christians. It was also affirmed that St Jordan, one of the monks who accompanied St Augustine, died in Bristol and was buried on or near the site of the later abbey.² No less an authority than the Venerable Bede mentions the meeting between St Augustine and the British Christians, but there is no other reference to St Jordan. Nonetheless there

was certainly a chapel dedicated to St Jordan on College Green throughout the later Middle Ages, and this is mentioned in a will of 1393 and in the fifteenth-century account rolls of the abbey. The chapel remained there for many years after the suppression of the abbey, and John Leland refers to 'A chapel in which St Jordan, the disciple of St Augustine apostle of the English, is buried', while later in the sixteenth century William Camden in his *Britannia* described College Green and 'a pulpit of stone and a chapel wherein they say Jordan, companion to St Austin the English Apostle, was buried'. The chapel and the stone pulpit or preaching cross were also referred to by witnesses in an enquiry into an affray which took place on College Green in 1579. The chapel is shown on the maps of Bristol drawn by George Hoefnagle in 1581 and by John Speed in 1610, but does not appear on the map made by James Millerd in 1673.

Late-Saxon burials were found during an archaeological excavation of the bomb-damaged site of St Augustine the Less which was situated to the east of the abbey church, and the whole area may well have been regarded as a sacred site. Thus it was used as a christian cemetery and venerated as the burial place of a saint who provides a close link with St Augustine of Canterbury. This was possibly the reason why Robert Fitzharding chose this as the site of his new monastic foundation in 1140.³

What is in every sense a much more solid piece of evidence survives in the massive carving, seven feet in height, depicting the 'Harrowing of Hell', which is now in the south transept of the cathedral. This dates from c1050 and has been described as 'one of the finest carvings of its day in Britain, or indeed in western Europe'.⁴ It shows the powerful figure of Christ treading upon the writhing devil in Hell and drawing up naked figures out of the depths by the power of the Cross. This remarkable carving was discovered re-used beneath the floor of the Chapter House in Bristol Cathedral during the 1830s, and provides strong evidence for a pre-Conquest church or shrine on the site.

A reference which occurs in a grant to the abbey made by William, Earl of Gloucester in c1148 mentions 'the church of St Augustine of Bristol and the regular canons of the same church', and goes on to speak of 'the *locus* that is called Bileswicke in which their church was founded'.⁵ In this context the word *locus* might well refer to a religious or sacred site, rather than merely 'a place', and there are numerous examples of its specific use to describe a shrine or site with ancient religious associations.⁶

Canon J.C. Dickinson, who has done so much to elucidate the early history of the abbey, commented on the fact that although most English



The Harrowing of Hell.
This dramatic carving c1000 shows the powerful figure of Christ trampling upon the Devil and drawing two naked figures out of the pit of Hell by the strength of the Cross

Augustinian houses were referred to by the name of the place in which they were situated, such as Keynsham, Bruton, Taunton etc., Bristol was always referred to in official documents as 'St Augustine's, Bristol' or '*juxta* Bristol'. Canon Dickinson wrote that

'Although the matter is utterly incapable of absolute proof given the total lack of medieval documentation on this sort of point, there seems little doubt that the tradition which is still held in Bristol of a connection between St Augustine and the site of the abbey was deep-rooted when Robert Fitzharding decided to found his monastery there'.⁷

In 1140 Bristol was already an important port guarded by a strong royal castle, with a rich and fertile hinterland and extensive trade with Ireland, Norway, France and other parts of Europe. William of Malmesbury writing in c1125 described Bristol as

'a port which is a commodious and safe harbour for all vessells, into which come ships from Ireland and Norway and from other lands beyond the seas'.⁸

While the anonymous author of the *Gesta Stephani* writing at about the same time as the foundation of the abbey in 1140 stated that

'Bristol is well-nigh the most opulent city in the country, admitting merchandise by shipping both from the neighbouring and foreign parts; seated in a very fertile part of England, and, in point of situation, the most impregnable of all English cities'.⁹

Fitzharding founded his abbey during the fierce and bloody civil war between the supporters of King Stephen and the adherents of the Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I. In this war Bristol played a very prominent part, for it became the principal stronghold of Matilda's forces under the command of her half-brother, Robert, Earl of Gloucester. It was in Bristol castle that the future King Henry II spent part of his childhood during the years 1142-6, and it was in Bristol that he would have become well-acquainted with Robert Fitzharding, one of the leading supporters of Matilda's cause, and may well have watched the early stages of building work on the newly-founded abbey. After the war Fitzharding received many of the Berkeley lands forfeited by Roger, Lord of Berkeley, who had supported the losing side in the war. Fitzharding thus became Lord of Berkeley, and the Berkeley influence

was to remain crucial to the wealth of the Augustinian abbey throughout its existence. Henry II remembered with affection the years he spent in Bristol, and when he became king in 1154 he not only granted a charter (1155) to the town, but also greatly augmented the endowments of the abbey, so that he had some claim to be regarded as joint founder, and his name still appears with that of Robert Fitzharding in the fifteenth-century inscription on the abbey gatehouse.

Fitzharding founded his abbey for a community of Augustinian canons, and as part of the Victorine section of this order, owing allegiance to the highly-respected house of St Victor in Paris. The order of Augustinian canons had been introduced into England by Archbishop Anselm in 1106, and other English foundations followed rapidly. The canons were communities of priests who had taken monastic vows and followed a Rule first set down by St Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century. They were known as Black Canons from their monastic dress of long black cassock and hood. Some of the first canons for the new monastery at Bristol were drawn from a recently-founded Victorine house in Herefordshire which started at Shobdon in about 1140 but later moved to Wigmore in the same county. The estates granted for the support of the Bristol canons included properties in Bristol and lands in Almondsbury, Berkeley, Ashleworth, Cromhall, Horfield and Arlingham in Gloucestershire; Tickenham, Weare, Clevedon, and Portbury in Somerset and Fifehead Magdalen in Dorset.¹⁰ For a few years before his death in 1170, Robert Fitzharding himself became a canon of the abbey which he had founded, and on his death was buried there. His wife, Eva, became abbess of the small Augustinian nunnery of St Mary Magdalen which the Fitzhardings had also founded on the lower slopes of St Michael's Hill overlooking Bristol.

From the Abbey Cartulary and the late-medieval *Roll* or *Chronicle* which records the major events in the abbey's history, it is possible to date the sequence of events during the foundation years with some confidence. The process was begun in 1140

'This goode lorde (Robert Fitzharding) primere fundator and Chanon of the Monastery of Seint Augustines bi Bristowe began the fundacion of the same in the yere of our Lord MCXL. And bilded the churche and all other howses of offices according to the same bi the space of vi yeres ...'¹¹

These buildings erected in the space of six years can hardly have been substantial and it seems clear that this first church was not on the site of the later abbey, but was further to the east, and in the position later

occupied by the church of St Augustine the Less which became the parish church for lay people living in the vicinity of the abbey. The authority for this is the antiquarian and topographer, William Worcestre, who was a Bristolian and who made detailed notes and measurements of many of the buildings in the town during the decade before his death in c1485. Worcestre remarked that the church of St Augustine the Less had just been completely rebuilt, but added that the earlier building had been the original abbey church 'the ancient and original church of the said abbey which is now a newly built church'.¹² The first canons arrived and the first abbot, Richard, who came from the abbey of St Victor in Paris, was formally inducted in 1148. For such an important event the abbey chronicler gives very precise and accurate detail, stating that the induction took place 'on the Easter day which was that yere the xi day of Aprile. And in the yere of our lord mcxlviiii'. Richard was to remain as abbot until 1186.¹³

It seems probable that as endowments increased, particularly after the accession of Henry II in 1154 and the end of the long civil war, the original site chosen was found to be unsuitable for a major church, large cloister and all the necessary domestic buildings. This was not unusual in the history of monastic foundations, and a move from the original site was not uncommon. At Bristol, however, the move was only a short distance to the west, to the site of the present cathedral, where a new church was begun soon after 1148. In 1159 the community was able to move into part of it during the short time that Alfred or Alured was bishop of Worcester (1158-60), in which diocese most of Bristol was to remain throughout the Middle Ages. A charter records a grant made to the abbey in the presence of the bishop on the day in which the canons entered their new church. At that time the community consisted of six canons. By c1170 work on the new church building was sufficiently advanced for it to be dedicated by four bishops, Worcester, Exeter, Llandaff and St Asaph.¹⁴

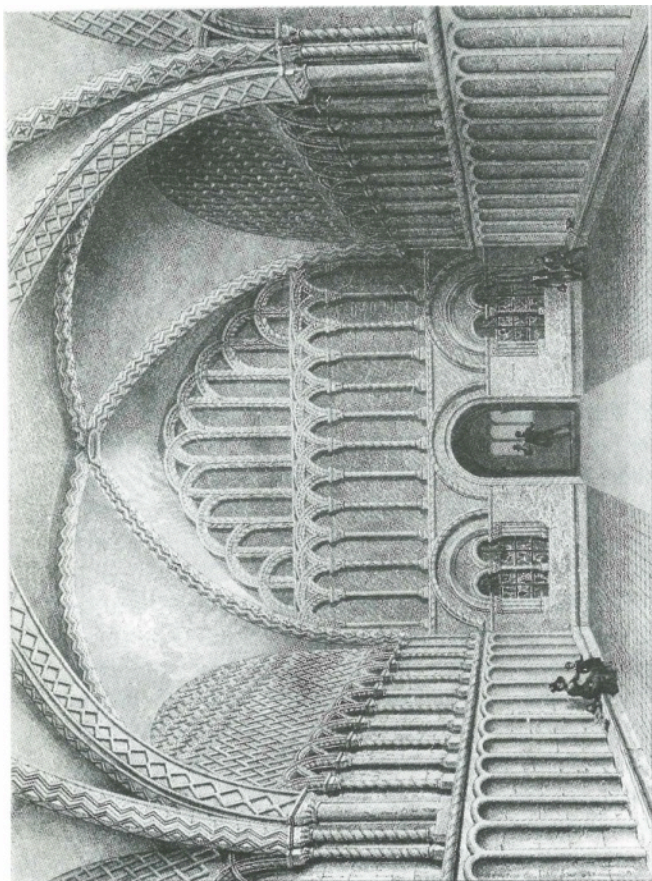
Although a good deal is known from the records of other houses about the daily life and religious observances of the Augustinian canons, very few documents survive for Bristol so that we know little about the daily life of the canons, their domestic arrangements, the standard of their religious observance or the conscientiousness with which they carried out their main function which was to maintain a constant round of prayer, praise and intercession to the Almighty, day and night. The suppression of the monastery in 1539 resulted in the loss of some documentary evidence, and much more was lost during the Bristol Riots of 1831, when the mob broke into the Chapter House and destroyed many of the records. The only evidence which does survive is that of the

occasional episcopal visitations, but the bishops were naturally much more concerned to record shortcomings and to condemn failings than they were to praise monastic zeal or religious devotion. The evidence of these visitations will be noted in due course. What does emerge clearly from the surviving records of the abbey is its wealth and the income which it derived from its widespread estates and properties. As already noted, most of these were in Bristol, Somerset and Gloucestershire, but the abbey also possessed considerable lands in Ireland, around Kilkenny, an area with which Bristol had strong trading links, although few precise details are known concerning these Irish lands. During the course of its history the abbey also acquired a considerable income from 'appropriated' parish churches, that is churches of which the abbey became the rector, taking the major proportion of the tithes, and appointing a vicar at a modest salary to care for the spiritual welfare of the parishioners. The substantial income from these and other sources made possible the expensive building work on the church and cloisters, and during the last decades of the twelfth century such work proceeded apace.

As well as the Norman church which consisted of a chancel, two transepts and a nave of six bays, late twelfth-century work which survives as one of the major architectural features of the cathedral includes the Chapter House with its vestibule, and the two gateways with their fine Romanesque carving. The quality of the work which the abbey could afford at this time is evident from the superb architecture of the Chapter House which remains the finest Romanesque building of its kind in England.

The next phase of building work on the abbey church occurred during the time of Abbot David (1216-1234). During his abbacy the Elder Lady Chapel was constructed as a separate chapel, entered from the north transept. With its elegant proportions and lively carvings, this chapel remains one of the most attractive features of the whole building. The similarities with contemporary workmanship and carving at Wells cathedral are very marked, and remarkably the connection can be well authenticated, for part of a letter book belonging to Abbot David survives covering the years c1218-1222. Among the letters is one in which the Abbot requested the Dean of Wells to lend the services of a stone-carver (your servant, L) from Wells to work on the new Lady Chapel at Bristol. It is probable that the carver was Adam Lock, who was master mason of Wells cathedral at that time.¹⁵

This letter book illustrates the financial strain which such high-quality building placed even on a wealthy abbey, for one of Abbot David's letters was addressed to the clergy of the churches on the abbey estates



The Chapter House of c.1170 is the finest example of Romanesque architecture in Bristol and illustrates the quality and splendour of the original buildings of the Abbey (from J. Britton, 'History and Antiquities of Bristol Cathedral', 1836)

urging them to send contributions for the completion of the Lady Chapel. The letters also reveal that Abbot David sailed to Wexford in 1218 and visited the abbey's Irish possessions, but he reported that the affairs of the abbey properties there were so complicated that it was improbable that they could be cleared up without Divine intervention.¹⁶ Abbot David resigned in 1234 by which time it is likely that the Elder Chapel for which he had been responsible was completed. Abbot Newland's *Chronicle* records that when Abbot David died he was 'beried under a Marble Stone with a hedde And a Crosse made of the same in the elder chapelle of oure Lady the yere of our Lord mccliii'. His badly-decayed memorial slab survives in the north transept by the entrance to his Lady Chapel.

Like many other monastic houses, the history of St Augustine's is marked by periods of intense activity during which the estates were carefully managed, new endowments were obtained, massive building projects were carried out and the religious life of the abbey flourished, interspersed by times when religious enthusiasm was less apparent, when there were quarrels between the abbots and canons, income was squandered in inappropriate ways and when highly critical comments were made by the diocesan bishops during their visitations. During the abbacy of William Long (1242-64) a dispute arose between the canons of St Augustine's and the brethren of St Mark's Hospital which had been founded c1220, concerning the use of what later became known as College Green, the pleasant green which separated the two communities, and intermittent quarrels over this matter were to drag on throughout the Middle Ages. The area was part of the precinct of St Augustine's abbey, but the brethren of St Mark's claimed rights of burial and other liberties there. After several years of conflict a temporary settlement was imposed by the bishop of Worcester in 1251. He ordered that the brethren of St Mark's should have free access to the green and could bury their dead in a specified area, but that the ground should be kept level 'in order to preserve the pleasantness of the place'. The rights of St Augustine's over the whole green were to be acknowledged, and the abbot was permitted to mow the grass and use the cuttings to spread on the floor of the abbey church or in St Augustine the Less. This sensible decision did not finally settle the matter, however, and there was a further dispute in 1259, and the subject continued to disrupt the relations between the two religious foundations until both were suppressed in 1539. The former burial ground and any archaeological evidence for St Jordan's chapel on College Green were destroyed when the Green was lowered in the 1950's during the construction of the Council House.¹⁷

More serious evidence of unbecoming conduct and waste of resources occurs during the time of Abbot John de Marina (1276-86). A visitation of the abbey was carried out by the energetic bishop of Worcester, Godfrey Giffard, in 1278, and he found a great deal to condemn. The bishop criticised the fact that the abbey buildings, which were now more than a century old, were badly dilapidated; that the abbot was ineffective and insufficiently well-educated to preach the word of God; that the estates were badly managed, and the services neglected or performed in a slovenly manner, and that 'the house is not well ruled in temporal matters for none of the brethren know what they have nor what they spend ...'.¹⁸ The seriousness of the failings uncovered by the episcopal visitation is evident from the long list of orders for reform left by the bishop. These can be summarised as follows:

Silence was to be observed in the cloister and refectory.

The canons were only to go out when necessary, only with the permission of the abbot and only in the company of another canon.

Rebellious and delinquent canons were to be severely punished.

All the fragments from the Canons' meals were to be distributed to the poor by the almoner.

No canon was to feign sickness in order to be accommodated in the infirmary.

No canons were to meet in the infirmary 'there to drink and practise drunkenness'.

All Canons were to abstain from slander and filthy speaking and were to use only holy and honest words.

The canons were not 'to fly out of the choir like bees' as soon as the services were ended, but remain to pray and thank God for their benefactors.

The accounts of the bailiffs and other abbey servants were to be carefully audited, and the estates were to be better managed.

The abbot was to reduce the size of his household and not give 'splendid entertainments'.

Clearly there was a great deal wrong to provoke such a formidable series of injunctions.¹⁹ The bishop's criticisms had some effect, for when he came again six years later in 1284 he found everything in good order, except that the abbot, who was an old man, lived in a manor house away

from the abbey with one of the canons, and he had allowed the house to be defrauded of £300 by Sir Bogo de Clare. The dispute with the influential de Clare family lasted several years before it was eventually settled in favour of the abbey.²⁰

The abbey continued to attract endowments from wealthy benefactors during the thirteenth century. Like other monastic houses, it was always keen to secure the appropriation of parish churches so that a major part of the parochial tithes should come to the abbey, and in 1257 the bishop of Bath and Wells was persuaded that because St Augustine's was situated in such a busy port 'frequented by strangers and foreigners' and consequently had heavy expenses in providing hospitality, it should be allowed to appropriate the churches of Portbury, Tickenham, Clevedon, Weare and Pawlett. This made a large addition to the annual income of the house.²¹ The Berkeley family continued to make generous gifts to the abbey, and further endowments were provided by Lord Maurice de Berkeley in 1281, while King Edward I, who spent Christmas 1283 at Bristol castle, also increased the income of the Augustinian canons.²² It was this wealth which enabled the canons to undertake further ambitious building projects.

Early Fourteenth-Century Reconstruction

A remarkable transformation of the abbey church was carried out during the time of Edmund Knowle who was one of the greatest builders in the history of the abbey. He was Sacrist or Treasurer from c1298 and Abbot from 1306 until his death in 1332. During that period he was responsible for the complete rebuilding of the eastern part of the abbey church and for major work on the cloisters and other building. Such important work was no doubt recorded in detail in the abbey records, and although these do not survive it is notable that two centuries later Abbot Newland's *Chronicle* was able to state precisely when building commenced.

'This reverende fader Abbot Edmunde causid mony notable dedis done in his tyme. first he bilded the church of the new fro the Fundamentes with the vestary. And began that grete werke the 6th day after the Assumption of our Lady (21 August) at the oure of ix. The yere of our Lord mccciii^{xx} xviii (1298)'.²³

As the result of Abbot Knowle's work, the small Romanesque eastern end of the abbey church, then more than 150 years old, was replaced by

a much larger and longer building in the Decorated style, consisting of a vaulted Lady Chapel and choir designed as a hall church in a startlingly new and adventurous manner. It is this work with the central area and aisles of equal height, and with its complex vault supported on tall uninterrupted arcades, providing a remarkable feeling of space and lightness, which gives the church its outstanding interest and international importance. This early fourteenth-century choir is unique among the larger English churches. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, writing in 1958, gave his opinion that

‘Abbot Knowle’s work at Bristol from the point of view of spatial imagination - which is after all the architectural point of view *par excellence* - is superior to anything else built in England and indeed in Europe at the same time’.²⁴

And likewise, a recent study has commented that

‘The architects who created the English Decorated style were the most inventive and individual of all English architects: even in this period of major innovations and eccentricities, Bristol is outstanding’.²⁵

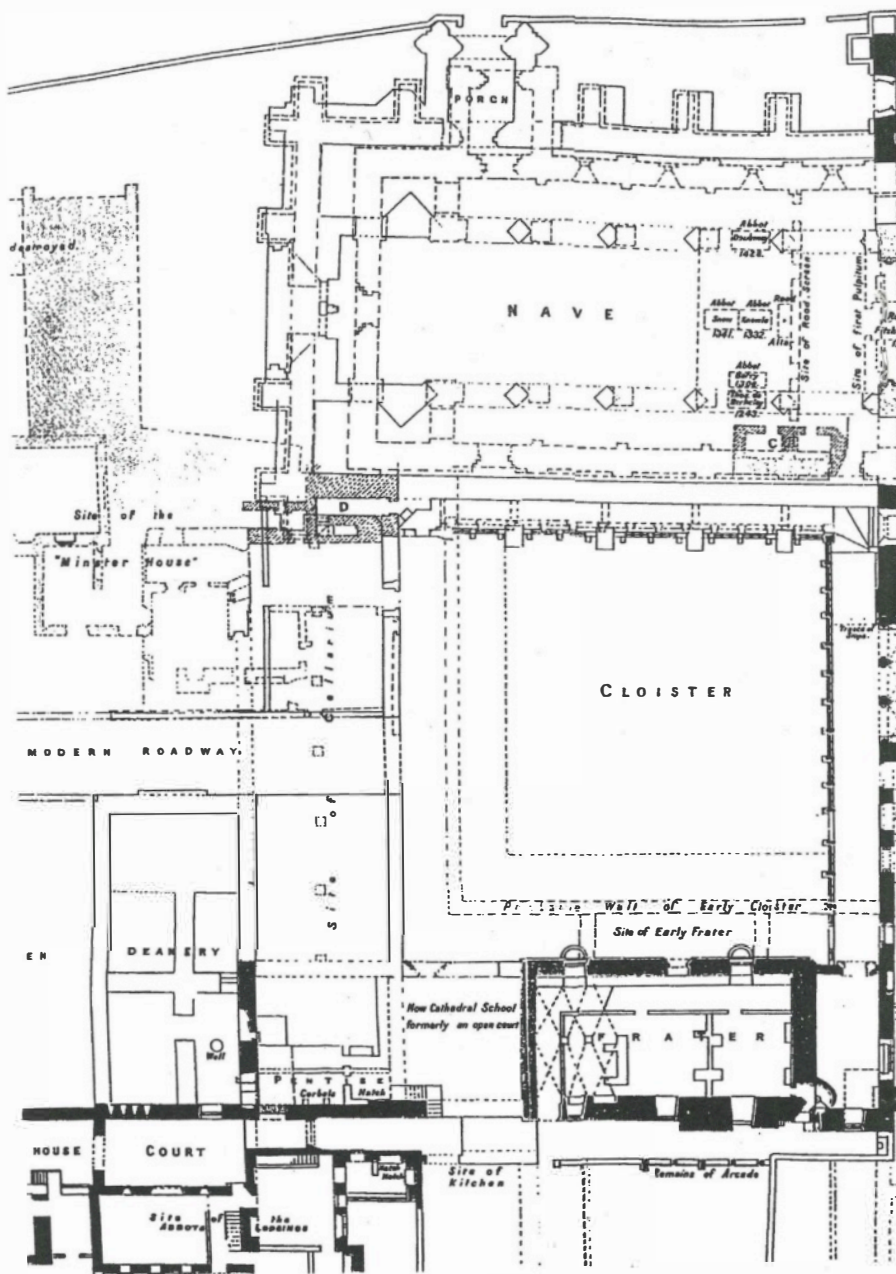
By a fortunate chance the name of one of the architects or master masons who were responsible for the design, planning and execution of this work is known to us from a document of c1316. His name was Nicholas de Derneford, and the information comes from a petition which he addressed to the king, Edward II, concerning the arrears in payment for his work on Beaumaris castle in Anglesey. In this he mentioned that he had previously worked on three other building projects, namely at St Augustine’s, Bristol, at Burton on Trent and at Repton priory.²⁶

By the early fourteenth century the number of canons had increased to twenty or more, and the need for a multiplicity of altars at which each could say daily Mass was met by the new and greatly enlarged building, and by the construction on the south side of the Berkeley chapel with its vestibule, and by the Newton chapel. The wider chancel now connected with the south wall of the Elder Chapel and linked this with the north choir aisle. The influence of the Berkeley family is emphasised by the heraldry in both stonework and glass, and by the contemporary Berkeley tombs. The walls of the new work were provided with a series of beautifully-designed tomb recesses, each in an unusual ‘stellate’ form which remains an attractive feature of the building.

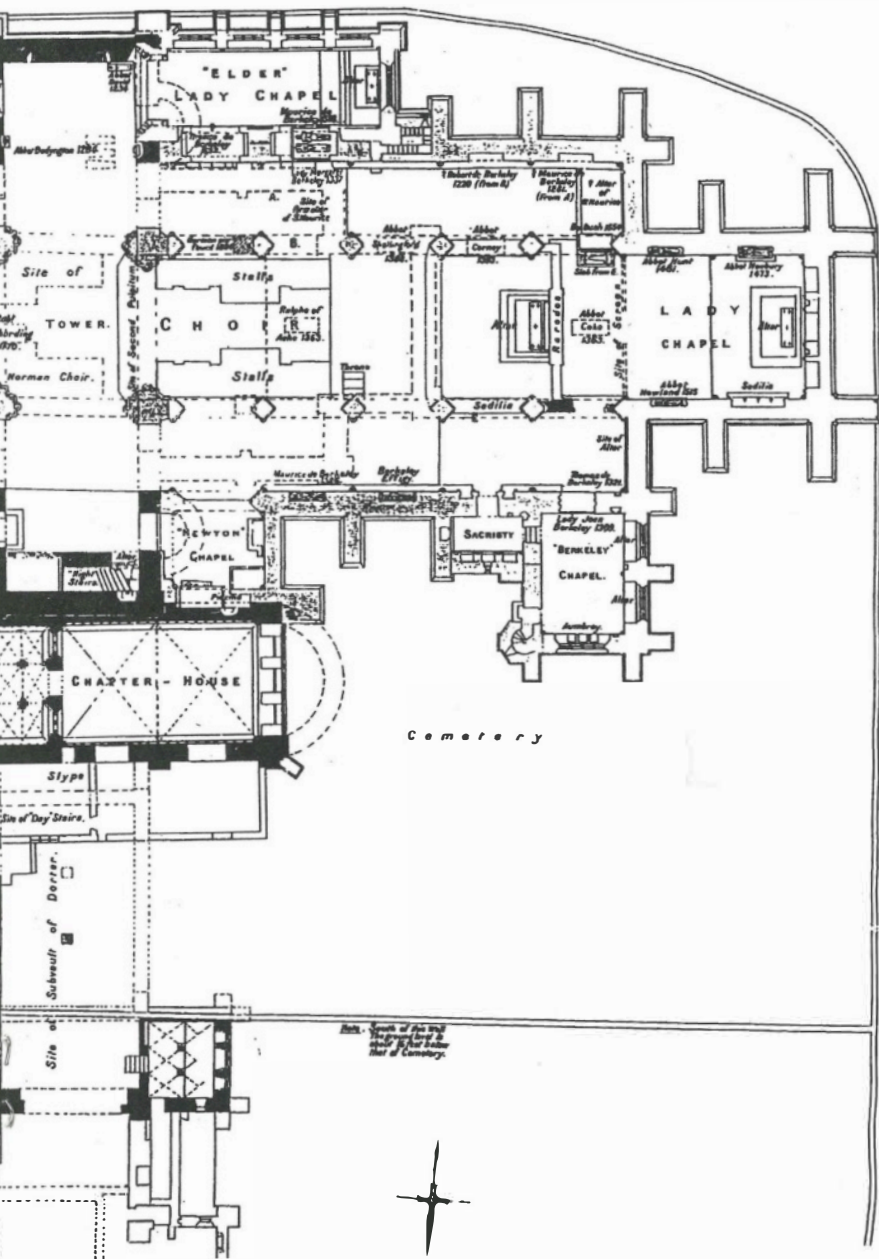
Work on the Berkeley chapel must have been completed soon after 1321 since Thomas, Lord Berkeley, who died in that year, is buried with



The Elder Lady Chapel built by Abbot David c1210-20 and decorated with remarkably lively carvings which were probably the work of Adam Lock of Wells (from J. Britton, 'History and Antiquities of Bristol Cathedral', 1836)



Part of the plan of St Augustine's Abbey by Roland W. Paul published in *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 1911, p. 100.



in 'Archaeologica', 63, 1912, 231-50 (from a copy supplied by Alan Rome)

his wife, Joan (died 1309), in a tomb set in an arch between the south aisle and the chapel. The Newton chapel was completed slightly later, together with the small chamber or treasury above it.

Edmund Knowle, one of the greatest of the abbots, was responsible for much of this new work which transformed the abbey church. He also rebuilt the cloisters including the frater or canons' dining room and two buildings at the west end known as the King's Hall and the King's Chamber, the northern end of the King's Hall stretching across the west end of the Norman nave and abutting College Green.²⁷ Knowle died in 1332 'And lythe beried under a brode marbull stone streight afore the Rode Auter (Rood Altar)'.²⁸ The building work was continued by his successor, John Snow, and again a date for its completion is provided by another Berkeley burial, for Margaret, Lady Berkeley, who died in 1337 'was worshipfully buried in the Church of St Augustine's monastery in the great tomb under the arch between the Elder Chapel of our Lady and the north aisle there ...'. Later her son Lord Maurice Berkeley, who died in 1368 of wounds received at the battle of Poitiers, was buried beside her. It was no doubt the continuing influence of the Berkeley family and their generous contributions to the abbey which had earlier led Abbot Knowle to refuse burial to the body of King Edward II who had been so brutally murdered at Berkeley castle in 1327 and whose body was eventually laid to rest in St Peter's abbey, Gloucester. The incident is possibly commemorated by a later roof-boss in the north transept of St Augustine's abbey which depicts a king in his death throes, although the identity of the king has been questioned.²⁹

Such ambitious building work was extremely expensive, straining the abbey's resources to the limit and also disrupting the ordered religious life of the canons. Abbot Knowle's total involvement in the elaborate architectural scheme for reconstructing the abbey church may perhaps explain an incident in 1307 when the Prior of Worcester, acting on behalf of the bishop, attempted to conduct a visitation of St Augustine's, but was refused admission 'with scornful words'. The Prior and his attendants retreated, but later that day one of the canons, John Rogan, was sent by the abbot 'to treat of the visitation with the commissioners and visitors then dwelling in a certain inn in the parish of the Blessed Mary in the market of Bristol'. No agreement was reached and the dispute dragged on for many months without any satisfactory conclusion. In 1320 another visitation reported many irregularities and laxity in the canons' behaviour, including the fact that they were much addicted to hunting and kept hounds in great numbers. The abbot himself may have shared this passion for hunting, since in 1331 he, together with one of the canons called John of Shaftesbury, was granted a pardon for having

pursued deer in the park belonging to the royal palace of Clarendon, near Salisbury.³⁰ It was undoubtedly the financial demands of building work which led the canons in a desperate search for parish churches which they could appropriate and so secure additional income from the tithes. In 1311, for example, the canons applied to the bishop of Worcester for permission to appropriate the church of Wotton-under-Edge, and no doubt with considerable exaggeration, painted a sorry picture of their deplorable situation. They omitted to reveal that they were rebuilding their church on a far grander scale than before, and complained that the building was ruinous, they were spending heavily on repairs, that their monastery was situated in 'a public port and a famous town' so that their burden of hospitality was very heavy, 'for many come from all parts of the world'. Waxing more eloquent, they told the bishop they were so burdened with debt that if he did not agree to their proposal they 'are in fear of desolation, which God forbid'. The bishop was obviously moved by their sorry story, and wrote

'They are in such want that it has often happened during the last few years that, when the hour of dinner came, the canons having neither food nor drink were compelled to send to the burgesses of Bristol asking for the necessary victuals as a loan or gift'.

He therefore agreed to their request to appropriate the tithes of Wotton-under-Edge.³¹ A few years later the canons also acquired the manor of Pawlett and other property in Somerset.³²

A further visitation in 1340 revealed numerous faults and negligence in the conduct of the services. The bishop, Wolstan de Bransford, ordered that there was to be no further strife between the canons, that conversation should only be conducted in French or Latin, that alms were to be regularly distributed and that no one was to be absent from the services without good cause.³³

The early fourteenth-century period of expansion and dramatic architectural achievement came to an abrupt end during the winter of 1348-49 which saw the onslaught of the Black Death. The plague started in the west country and hit the crowded, busy and insanitary port of Bristol very hard. A contemporary chronicler records 'there died almost all the strength of the town, suddenly overwhelmed by death', and although there is no evidence of the death rate among the Augustinian canons it was probably not less than that among the clergy of Somerset, 48 per cent of whom died in the plague. A list of the Bristol town council in 1349 names fifty-two men, and of these fifteen names are crossed through to indicate that they were dead.³⁴

Before the onslaught of the plague there were about 25 canons at St Augustine's; it is not known how many of these died in the plague, and although the numbers recovered quickly they were never again to rise above 20. In 1352 when the abbot, Ralph de Asshe died, a meeting to elect his successor was held in the Chapter House and was attended by fifteen canons of whom a majority chose William Cok or Coke who had been sub-prior. The names of the canons who took part in this election make it clear that most came from the west country. The names included Robert Dunster, Simon de Tormarton, Robert de Syde, John Badminton, Walter Cheltenham, Laurence de Cirencestre, John de Launston, Thomas de Bykenore (Bicknor) and Walter de Shaftesbury.³⁵

The economic difficulties of the later fourteenth century and their effect on the religious life and financial affairs of the abbey are apparent from the surviving records. In 1366, for example, there is evidence of financial problems and King Edward III ordered Maurice, Lord Berkeley and other leading local figures to supervise the affairs of the abbey because it had granted 'profitless leases' on its properties and sold numerous 'corrodies' or agreements to maintain elderly persons in the abbey to unsuitable people, 'suspected and ill-famed persons', while the house was also greatly burdened by 'excessive and fruitless expenses of the abbot'. Again, in 1371 the abbey was said to be so burdened with debt that alms-giving and other pious works had been abandoned. One remarkable document survives from these decades following the catastrophe of the Black Death. This consists of thirty-two folios from a *Temporale* or choir book, a selection from the Missal giving the variable parts of the Mass and other services throughout the year. It survives because the pages were used as covers for later account books, and the beautifully-written text in red and black dating from c1350-80 includes initial letters decorated with fantastic creatures, with one depicting a bishop with his crozier and another showing an Augustinian canon using a buckler to repel an arrow while brandishing a curry-comb in his other hand. As well as providing the text of the services, the pages of the *Temporale* also include an elaborate system of musical notation. These colourful pages provide a potent reminder of the central purpose of the abbey, and evidence that throughout all the difficulties, and despite plagues, building work, debt or scandal, the regular round of services continued, and the daily offering of prayer and praise to the Almighty was maintained.³⁶

Lapses in standards were also revealed in a visitation by the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Courtenay, in 1385. He found that the canons wore high boots of black leather 'and by the uncleanness and greasiness thereof both their white habits and the vestments of the altar

were so dirty as to be a scandal to beholders'. The Archbishop ordered that they were to wear leggings of black or brown made of cloth not costing more than 20d per yard, although they could wear boots outside the monastery. He denounced one canon, Adam Horsley, for bad behaviour and for wasting the goods of the monastery. Horsley seems to have remained troublesome and a few years later he was sent to Ireland to supervise the management of the abbey properties there. There must have been a marked improvement in standards at the abbey by the end of the fourteenth century, however, for in 1398 Pope Boniface IX granted to the abbot, John Daubeney, and his successors the coveted right of wearing a mitre and other insignia, exempting the abbey from episcopal visitation, giving the abbot the right to sit in the House of Lords, and confirming the status of the abbey as one of the major English houses.³⁷

As landlords the canons were not always popular with their tenants or with the townspeople of Bristol, although inevitably it is only evidence of disputes or violent confrontation which appears in the written records. In 1325 there were riots by the tenants at Leigh (Abbots Leigh) and abbey property was destroyed or looted; and at the end of the fourteenth century there were serious disturbances in Bristol when the mayor, John Canyng, and many of the townspeople protested against the extension of the abbey mills and watercourses by the Avon at Trivelmills, complaining that they were excluded from their right of way and ferry.³⁸ In 1452 there were more riots by the abbey tenants and large numbers of men from Wraxall, Nailsea, Failand, Tickenham, Long Ashton, Bedminster, Alveston and Olveston broke into the abbot's house in Bristol and assaulted him.³⁹ Further violent protests over the abbey mills occurred in 1468 and the abbey was obliged to spend £120 in rebuilding four water mills 'called Trynemills near the cliffs called Redcliff'. During the years 1491 to 1496 there was a bitter quarrel with the mayor and officials of Bristol over rights on College Green and the abbey precinct, and also over the abbey's right to provide sanctuary for fugitives. Again, this dispute led to riot and violence between the townspeople and the abbey servants, and was only settled through the mediation of Cardinal Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Chief Justice.⁴⁰

Whatever effect the Black Death of 1348-49 had on the religious life of the abbey and on the number of canons, the impact of the plague and its consequences for the economy of the west country meant that construction work on the abbey church and the monastic buildings ceased for nearly a century. During this long period the religious life of the canons and their daily round of services took place in the splendid

chancel and its associated chapels which had been completed before the Black Death, and in the small low Romanesque nave which survived from the twelfth century. Major building work was re-started during the abbacy of Walter Newbury who became abbot in 1428. His long period of office was interrupted for five years, from 1455-1460, when in an obscure period of monastic politics he was deposed from office by the canons and Thomas Sutton managed to be elected in his place. By 1460, however, the canons appear to have had a change of heart. Sutton was accused of wasting the resources of the abbey, and Walter Newbury was restored to office. He remained as abbot until his death in 1473. Meanwhile Thomas Sutton left Bristol to become Prior of a small Augustinian house at Chaddleworth in Berkshire. The memory of Sutton's seizure of the abbacy and of the events associated with it were still vivid when Abbot Newland's *Chronicle* was written during the period 1481-1515, for Sutton is described as a usurper who had achieved his purpose 'with subtilite and meynenance' and as one who had wasted and spent the revenues, allowed the properties to go to ruin and inflicted irreparable damage on the future income of the abbey.⁴¹ According to Newland's *Chronicle*, however, Abbot Walter Newbury was responsible for a great deal of building work on the abbey estates, including new buildings on the abbey manors at Fifehead Magdalen in Dorset, Leigh (Abbots Leigh) in Somerset and Almondsbury in Gloucestershire. The most notable survival of Abbot Newbury's work on the abbey estates, and the place where more than anywhere else it is possible to appreciate the wealth of the Bristol Augustinians, is at Ashleworth on the banks of the Severn north of Gloucester. This estate had belonged to the abbey since Robert Fitzharding's time, and the parish church contains considerable twelfth-century work, but under Abbot Newbury the church was substantially rebuilt, and a fine new Court House and Manor House were provided which survive together with a magnificent barn built later in the fifteenth century to store the produce of the abbey lands. The whole complex of buildings now provides a splendid example of a monastic grange, and a remarkable memorial to Abbot Newbury's work.⁴² During the later years of Newbury's long period of office, work was begun on a new central tower for the abbey church, equipping it with new bells, and remodelling the transepts, covering them with complex vaults complete with a finely-carved series of roof-bosses.⁴³ Evidence for the scale and cost of this work is provided by account rolls which show payments to a master mason, John Marshfield, who is described as 'Master of the New Work', and expenses in leasing a quarry at Dundry from the bishop of Bath and Wells and the cost of bringing stone from the quarries at Dundry and Felton.⁴⁴ Work on the abbey

estates and granges, as well as on the church and the monastic buildings, was continued under Abbot William Hunt (1473-81) and most notably under the long rule and forceful leadership of Abbot John Newland (1481-1515). John Newland, who is also known as Nailheart from his *rebus* or badge of a heart pierced by three nails, deserves to take his place with Abbot Edmund Knowle (1306-1332) as one of the greatest contributors to the abbey buildings. He was also responsible for barns, stables and farm buildings on the estates, including five new barns at Berkeley and most notably the magnificent barn at Ashleworth. Newland supervised the reconstruction of the cloisters, the building of the upper part of the great Gatehouse, the canons' *dorter* or dormitory, the *frater* or dining room, and the Prior's Lodging to the west of the cloisters, parts of which were to survive under the name of the Minster House until 1884. Above all, it was Abbot Newland who began the major project of replacing the twelfth-century nave in a style commensurate with the chancel. Since the new nave was to be wider than the previous one, work on the new foundations and walls could be started while the old nave remained in use, and the continuation of Newland's *Chronicle* sums up the achievement and records that by the time of Newland's death in 1515 the foundations had been laid and the new walls on the north and west sides had reached to the sills of the windows,

'the fundacioun of the body (nave) of the church to the soilis (sills) of the Wyndos of the north side and to the westend, with other houses of office, And many other grete benefytes for the which God reward hym with eternal blisse, Amen'.⁴⁵

Details concerning the size of the late-medieval church are provided by the antiquarian, William Worcestre, who was a native of Bristol, and who devoted himself in c1480 to recording and measuring the churches, houses, streets and lanes of his native town. From his measurements it is clear that the length of the surviving Norman nave was about 90 feet, while the choir and Lady Chapel was 90 feet long and 27 feet wide. He found that the Chapter House was 72 feet long and 24 feet wide, and he also measured the side chapels. Curiously, he does not mention the recently-built central tower, nor the Chapel of St Jordan on College Green, although he describes the Green and St Mark's Chapel.

During the final decades of the abbey's existence we also have, for the first time, some remarkably detailed documentary evidence concerning its wealth, the extent of its estates, its income and expenditure. This evidence is of outstanding interest since it consists of complete accounts or 'compotus rolls' for the years 1491-2, 1496-7,

1503-4, 1506-7 and 1511-12. The accounts show the life of this wealthy community of canons continuing in the way it had done for the previous four and a half centuries, with no inkling that their institution would soon cease to exist, along with all the other monastic houses in the country. By the late fifteenth century the establishment consisted of about a dozen canons, and the annual income to support them amounted to more than £700, an enormous sum of money in twentieth century terms. This income can be classified under four main headings:

	<i>1491-92</i>	<i>1511-12</i>
1. Fees, offerings and oblations	£1 2s 6½d	£1 9s 10½d
2. Revenues from property and appropriated churches in Bristol	£105 18s 7½d	£82 19s 5½d
3. Revenues from manors, rectories and property outside Bristol	£595 3s 10½d	£595 3s 2d
4. Profits from trade	£65 16s 2½d	£65 19s 8d

The first category comprised the offerings made by visitors to the abbey, but since St Augustine's possessed no famous relic or venerated statue to attract the pilgrims, only a small sum was raised each year. Revenues from Bristol property included tithes from three appropriated churches, All Saints', St Nicholas and St Augustine the Less, as well as income from houses, shops, inns, water mills, a rope walk and other property which the abbey owned in Bristol. By far the largest part of the income came from the widespread estates which included property at eleven places in Gloucestershire, six in Somerset and one in Dorset. From these rural properties income came in the form of rents, tithes, profits of manorial courts, sales of timber and the like. Land in most manors was let on lease, but in a few places - Canonbury in Berkeley parish, Blacksworth on the north bank of the Avon east of Bristol, Cromhall in the lower Severn valley and South Cerney in the Cotswolds - the demesne lands were managed for the abbey by bailiffs. From most manors, however, the abbey received money rents and there was little contact between the canons and those who contributed to their maintenance. Lands at Leigh (Abbots Leigh) and Portbury were farmed by abbey servants, and a constant supply of produce was brought up the Avon to be consumed by the canons and their staff at the abbey or to be sold in Bristol. Profits from trade included the sale of malt from the

abbey malt house, and the sale of second-quality bread from the abbey bakery.

The main items of expenditure can be summarised under five headings:

1. The abbot's allowance
2. Business expenses
3. Housekeeping
4. Expenses for spiritual duties
5. The regular allowance for the canons.

Responsibility for the various aspects of the abbey's affairs were shared among the 'obedientaries' or canons in charge of particular departments. Thus the Sacrist looked after the furnishings of the church and provided all things necessary for the services, the Vestiar was responsible for clothing, the Cellarer for foodstuffs and ale, the Chamberlain visited the manors and held manorial courts, the Almoner distributed charity, and the Infirmarer looked after the sick. Like the heads of other monastic houses, the abbot of St Augustine's maintained a separate and lavish household and his expenses consumed some 20 per cent of the total income of the house. Business expenses included legal costs, travel, papal and other taxes and payments to local and royal officials. Housekeeping included food, drink and clothing for the canons, wages to the numerous abbey servants, the cost of the guest house and infirmary and the upkeep of buildings. In 1491-2 this amounted to £198 16s 5d, while in 1511-12 it came to £188 17s 6d. Spiritual expenses included the care of the abbey church with its sumptuous vestments, books, lights and other expensive items and the maintenance of the choir school and the grammar school. In 1491-2 expenditure under this heading was £81 13s 4d, while in 1511-12 it was £93 9s 3d. The school provided education both for the choristers who sang in the Lady Chapel, and for other boys in the grammar school which was maintained within the abbey. In the accounts there are payments to a 'Cantor and Master of the Boys' and to a 'Grammar Master' in the *schola grammaticalis*. The sum of £17 0s 0d was spent in 1491-2 and John Griffith, vicar of St Augustine the Less, was paid 13s 4d for instructing the junior canons and other boys. By 1511-12 expenditure on education had risen to £26 0s 0d, and a layman, Richard Bramston, was employed as 'master of the boys' at a salary of £3 6s 8d. It was no doubt the boys from the abbey school who were responsible for the inscribed slate with part of the alphabet on one side and a figure who may represent one of the masters roughly drawn on the other, which was found during the 1992 excavation.⁴⁶

The allowance to the canons was a late-medieval development which persisted in spite of regular condemnation by bishops at their visitations. The canons were each given regular sums of money or gratuities which they could spend as they pleased. In 1491-2 the sum of £33 0s 7d was distributed in this way, and in 1511-12 it amounted to £30 15s 2d. The accounts show that in general the income of the abbey was carefully husbanded and that there appears to have been no undue waste or lavish expenditure. The late Arthur Sabin, who spent many years in the detailed examination of these records, concluded that 'the abbey resources were carefully garnered and controlled', that

'The standard of living that they indicate was not excessively high, but it was certainly comfortable. There is no evidence of asceticism on the one hand nor of gluttony and over-indulgence on the other'.

and that

'the abbey rose adequately to contemporary standards of correct conduct even if it did not soar very high in saintliness. It seems reasonable ... to suppose that it was in the main expending its income according to the wishes of its founders'.⁴⁷

By the 1530s, however, there were few people who were prepared to defend a system in which an annual income of more than £700 was used to support the prayers of a dozen canons, and when the abbey was suppressed in 1539 and all its property and wealth passed to the King, no voices were raised in Bristol in its support or to argue for its continuance.

The final building work undertaken by the abbey, the complete rebuilding of the nave on an altogether larger and grander scale was extremely expensive, and work proceeded very slowly under Abbot Newland's successors, Robert Elyot (1515-25), William Burton (1525-39) and Morgan ap Gwilliam (1539). The Berkeley influence and benevolence continued until the end, and in 1521 Maurice, Lord Berkeley left 'a great portion of money towards the building of the body (nave) of the church of the monastery of St Augustine'. But by this time the tide of events was running strongly in favour of reform in the Church, and Bristol, where Lollard preachers had been active, was particularly affected by new ideas and greatly disturbed by reforming preachers, some of whom used the open-air pulpit which stood on College Green near the Chapel of St Jordan.⁴⁸ In 1534 Henry VIII was invested by Parliament with the title of Supreme Head of the Church,

and the process began which was to lead to the suppression of all the monastic houses. St Augustine's survived until 9 December when the abbot, Morgan ap Gwilliam and eleven canons were awarded pensions, and forty-six servants were paid their wages and dismissed, while all the lands, property, buildings and valuables were seized for the Crown.⁴⁹ No scandal or irregularity was alleged against the canons, apart from a reference to their unruly conduct over the disputed election of Robert Elyot in 1515, and it was only later that a case before the Ecclesiastical Court revealed that one canon, John Rastle, had been a notorious gambler and had enticed men to his chamber at the abbey to play at cards with him.⁵⁰ During the course of the suppression or shortly afterwards, the old nave of the abbey church and the partly-built walls of the new nave were demolished, leaving only the chancel, transepts and central tower.

Throughout the Middle Ages most of Bristol had been included within the large diocese of Worcester, while the suburban parishes across the Avon, Redcliffe, Temple, St Thomas and Bedminster, were part of the diocese of Bath and Wells. On 4 June 1542 a new diocese of Bristol was created by Henry VIII consisting of Bristol and some neighbouring parishes together with the county of Dorset. This curiously-constituted and administratively-impossible diocese was to remain in existence until 1836. For the cathedral of the new diocese in 1542, the former abbey church of St Augustine was chosen, while the bishop's palace and houses for the cathedral canons were situated in the former monastic buildings. Since the nave of the abbey church was demolished, the new cathedral consisted only of the chancel and eastern Lady Chapel together with the transepts, elder Lady Chapel and side chapels, while a wall was built to close off the western end of the transepts. The truncated and inconvenient building was to remain in this form until the later nineteenth century. The transformation of the building from abbey to cathedral in 1542, however, meant that most of the outstandingly interesting medieval church survives together with the Chapter House, part of the cloisters, the gatehouse and much other medieval work, while the excellence of the Victorian nave completes a building of great historical as well as artistic and architectural interest.⁵¹

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